



Special Olympics Mongolia



Special Olympics Bahrain



Special Olympics Kuwait



Special Olympics Alaska



Special Olympics Argentina



SPECIAL OLYMPICS COSTA RICA



SPECIAL OLYMPICS MACAU



Special Olympics Pakistan



Special Olympics Paraguay



Special Olympics Rwanda



FAMILIES

THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS HANDBOOK FOR EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

ADVICE, STORIES, OBSERVATIONS, AND TIPS FROM SPECIAL OLYMPICS FAMILY AND PROGRAM LEADERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Special Olympics



CONTRIBUTORS

Dakota Ramirez | Community Programs Manager, Special Olympics Alaska

Sara Bala | Sports Director, Special Olympics Albania

Mercedes Fielder | Executive Director, Special Olympics Argentina

Cristina Miranda | Family Program Director, Special Olympics Argentina

Nazik Marhoon | Head of Family Leadership Council, Special Olympics Bahrain

Denise Pestana | Board Chair, Special Olympics Curaçao

Viktória Pázmány | Family Program Coordinator, Special Olympics Hungary

Dr. Ali Dashti | President of the Kuwait Family Leadership Council, Special Olympics Kuwait

May Choi | Family Leader of Family Support Network, Special Olympics Macau

Cintia Chan | Registered Psychotherapist, Special Olympics Macau

Amy Cheok | Family Support Coordinator, Special Olympics Macau

Connie Yee | National Director, Special Olympics Malaysia

Nibal Fetouni | Director of Initiatives, Special Olympics Middle East-North Africa

Altantsetseg Baldandorj | National Director, Special Olympics Mongolia

Dovchinjav Khishigjargal | Former Regional Family Leader, Special Olympics Mongolia

Amarbuyan Amar | Board Member, Special Olympics Mongolia

Nauman Mehboob | National Coordinator, National Family Support Network, Special Olympics Pakistan

Silvia Britez | Coordinator of the Family Program, Special Olympics Paraguay

Rocío Carrillo | Executive Director, Special Olympics Paraguay

Sylvie Kanyemera | Family Representative on the Board of Directors, Special Olympics Rwanda

Researched and prepared by:

Ben Haack

Special Olympics Athlete
Leader Consultant

Will Schermerhorn

Content Consultant, Blueberry
Shoes Productions LLC

Designed by:

Yaiguli Alvarado



"If family members are involved, the importance of the Program is more visible. There's more drive and more commitment to invest in the Program, even if the challenges are big. The community sees the family members are involved. If there's no family members, it's like, 'Okay, we're doing this, and it's a good thing for the community,' but that's it."

Denise Pestana SO Curaçao



"I joined Special Olympics about seven years ago, and the first people I encountered were, of course, the family members of the athletes. So, in that moment, I understood that the family members are the most important and the biggest force to move our Special Olympics movement forward."

Altantsetseg Baldandorj SO Mongolia



"Decisions are made from the top, but most of the time, it's with suggestions from the bottom of the pyramid. Our family representatives are not members of the board of directors, but they are leading groups that work with the Program."

Sylvie Kanyemera SO Rwanda



"When I found out that my child has special education needs, family events with Special Olympics Macau gave me an opportunity to let go, to believe that my son can do it, just like other children do." **May Choi** Special Olympics Macau



“Why do we invest time to engage families? Because I think personally that **family is the backbone of Special Olympics.**”

■ **Connie Yee** Special Olympics Malaysia ■

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Welcome to the Special Olympics Handbook for **Effective Family Engagement**

This is a resource for Special Olympics Program leaders who want to engage family members with close connections to the Program.

Family engagement is more than attending events. It’s really about taking an active role in helping the development of athletes and the Program.

The information in this guide came from interviews with Program staff and family members around the world. They shared tips and insights on how they successfully connected with and involved families in their Programs. As much as possible, the advice is in their words.

Read on for information on

- Understanding what family members can bring to your Program.
- Why family members are valuable partners in achieving Program goals.
- All the different kinds of people who can be considered the “family” of an athlete.
- How to reach out and connect with family members throughout your Program area.
- How to welcome family members of all ages, all backgrounds and all interests.
- How to get family members to go from “just showing up” to making a difference in your work.
- How to build and grow your Program’s family engagement structure, near and far.
- Unexpected ways family members strengthen the community of your Program.



“Families are basic, essential stakeholders.”

■ **Nazik Marhoon** Special Olympics Bahrain



“We believe the family is the most important and the foundation for the development, the improvement, the progress of the Special Olympics athletes.”

■ **Dr. Ali Dashti** Special Olympics Kuwait

“The family is a big motor for the program, especially on our small island. We have less resources, so everything is voluntary. We have no paid staff. Family members are the persons who are the most motivated and also the most committed to the program.”

■ **Denise Pestana** Special Olympics Curacao

“The truth is that we also learned a lot from the families. It’s not that we are teaching them all the time, they’re also teaching us a lot.”

■ **Mercedes Fielder** Special Olympics Argentina ■

"Family members have all the inside information. They're 24-7 with the children with intellectual disabilities. They know about their interests, hobbies, abilities. Even more than coaches, I think the first people I would approach about the athletes would be family members." | **Altantsetseg Baldandorj** Special Olympics Mongolia

Experienced family leaders want you to know this



MONGOLIA



RWANDA



MALAYSIA

Family members can help with all kinds of tasks

"Families support all activities in Special Olympics Paraguay, not only sports competitions, but also other activities as well. They spontaneously participate in our activities as volunteers, providing food, hydration, services and logistics for games in regions throughout our country." *Silvia Britez of Special Olympics Paraguay.*

Family members want the best for their children.

When new families arrive at events with Special Olympics **anywhere in the world**, they are often uncertain about Special Olympics and the new people they are meeting. That is common, so it's important to go slow, be welcoming and share information about the Program.

"Most of them want their kids to be well," says Sylvie Kanyemera of Special Olympics **Rwanda**. "They want their kids to be involved in sports so they can be fit and not stay home doing nothing."

Parents may not know a lot about Special Olympics and what it offers, but they know when they are being welcomed. Part of that is a feeling of belonging, Sylvie said: "They don't feel like they are put aside. They feel like a family member and a member of society."

Family members can help solve problems

"The family members who are involved always come with a solution if there is a challenge," says Denise Pestana of Special Olympics **Curaçao**. "That's because they want the Program to stay alive in the essentials that we need—funding and coaches and volunteers."

Family members can help with connections for fundraising and partnerships

"They can open doors for us. They know people in government departments. They are just so important," said Connie Yee of Special Olympics **Malaysia**.

It's like that in **Argentina**, too, said Cristina Miranda. In that country, there are family engagement groups throughout the country. The local families know their towns and cities well. "They are capable of making alliances with different institutions or with different spheres with the government."

And having family members representing your Program makes people in the community notice, says Denise Pestana of Special Olympics Curaçao. "If there are family members involved, the importance of the program is more visible. There's more drive and more commitment to invest in the program, even if the challenges are big."



ALASKA

"Families are really engaged in helping build up their Program, helping fundraise so they can get equipment and uniforms and give our athletes the opportunity to go to state competitions and competitions outside of Alaska."

| **Dakota Ramirez** SO Alaska

"Family members are coaches, family members are volunteers, family members help in competitions. They help with registration, they prepare food, they order things. They get things done."

| **Connie Yee** SO Malaysia

"The families' engagement is not just supportive but also transformative. It provides us an opportunity to invest quality time in learning and applying some unique techniques: Support, love, encouragement and care that no one else can do."

| **Nauman Mehboob** SO Pakistan

"For us, it is super important and fundamental to engage with the families because they share life with our athletes. It's really important for the quality of life of the family in general, for the athletes, and for the rest of the family, and for us."

Cristina Miranda Special Olympics Argentina

Family engagement is powerful in many ways

Make Families Partners in your Program, and then Watch Them Grow

Special Olympics focuses on the potential of our athletes with intellectual disabilities, but being part of a Program can lead family members to grow in ways they'd never expected.

Amarbuyan "Buya" Amar of Special Olympics **Mongolia** is an example.

"Along with our children, we parents also grow a lot," Buya says. "We learn so much from this experience. Maybe ten years ago, I wouldn't see myself in a leadership position. Being a leader is not in my nature, but for my son, I have done so many things. Not only to be a leader, but also to be a speaker, an advocate. While I'm helping my son to do something, I am learning, myself, to communicate with other people."



HUNGARY



KUWAIT

Engage with families to bring them new hope and optimism

"In Hungary, if you have a child with ID, the only way to go is to send the child to a segregated kindergarten and school. And you don't have any opportunities, not even in sport or in free-time activities, to join an integrated or inclusive events," says Viktória Pázmány, Special Olympics **Hungary**. "That causes families to lose their motivation to live the life they wanted to live before they got a child with ID."

When families connect with Special Olympics, all that can change. "It can give parents a new vision at this time, and it can keep them from losing their motivation and getting burned out," Viktória says.

That's because Special Olympics makes worthwhile changes in the lives of our athletes with intellectual disabilities and their family members, too.

"The family will be able to notice a before and after in Special Olympics," said Silvia Britez of Special Olympics **Paraguay**. "They learn how to help their children become independent in their day-to-day lives. What the family gets is a change of life, which is the most important thing. They become more confident in themselves as a family. They become more united, trusting in their children and they gain a lot of confidence, autonomy and independence for everything."

"Family engagement changes the perception of the families regarding their athletes, because before coming to family engagement, the children with IDD were the least priority. But now, after joining the family support network, they have seen the growth of the children with ID and now they are the top priority."

Nauman Mehboob SO Pakistan



MALAYSIA

Understand that family members will form friendships and help each other

"Our family members like each other. They have a lot to discuss," says Sylvie Kanyemera of Special Olympics **Rwanda**. "They share a cause and similar issues, but everyone has his own experience. Some have more experience, and others are new. When they talk in their small groups, they share information, and they get contacts. They feel like family, all one family in Special Olympics **Rwanda**."

That is true in Special Olympics **Alaska**, too, says Dakota Ramirez.

"Making friends with other family members involved in the Program is going to be our families' biggest asset," Dakota says. "Having that extra support, whether it's driving other athletes to practice, helping at athlete practices, having someone there when you need to talk, having the support within the community --all of that makes the experience so much better."



PAKISTAN

"The diverse backgrounds and the variety of conditions and circumstances brings in knowledge, a rich treasure of knowledge, that you can't find somewhere else." | **Dr. Ali Dashti** Special Olympics Kuwait

Reach out to **connect** with new athletes and families



Use athlete leaders and family members to appeal to new families.

"Mongolia is a very big country with a vast territory. Most of the time, when we want to reach out to the remote areas, we **travel like a thousand kilometers** through the countryside. And during this travel and during this training, **we always bring one or two family members or one or two athletes**, so they can talk firsthand about how Special Olympics made their lives completely different.

"After we did that in the western areas, they said, '**You really opened our eyes. We had no idea that our children can become athletes.** Our children can become more open and confident. We just feel that we lost like ten years without knowing about Special Olympics.' It's like this every time we go to new locations or to new sites." *Altantsetseg Baldandorj of Special Olympics Mongolia.*



Respect and embrace diversity in families.

"Here in **Argentina**, we always make sure to respect the different cultures. And we try to share with very simple things, like just listening and sharing a maté. That's a very common, traditional way of sitting down and listening to somebody and sharing. It's something that people from all different social, economical backgrounds do. It doesn't matter if you are a rich person or if you are poor. Listening and sharing something is super important." *Cristina Miranda of Special Olympics Argentina*

Who is Family? All are welcome!



Family engagement is for the whole family, not just an athlete's mother and father, sisters and brothers.

"As long as they are the caregiver of that athlete, to us, they are family. We don't treat them differently," says Connie Yee of **Malaysia**. "It could be great aunts or cousins."

"In so many cases, the family members are not only mother and father. We know many, many grandparents who come because the parents are busy with their jobs. I know many a grandmother or grandfather brings the kids. And, we know a lot of siblings and even we know who some aunts or uncles who are taking care of the child with ID. We even have friends, who behave like family members," says Altantsetseg Baldandorj of **Mongolia**.

And you can welcome all people who have love for a Special Olympics participant.

"There are also families by heart, you know, not by blood," says Viktória Pázmány of **Hungary**. "There are coaches and staff from education centers who say they want to take part in activities. "We are one family together, they say."



"We are not asking them to come to us. We are going out to them, and we are reaching out to them."

| **Nauman Mehboob** SO Pakistan

“At the first meeting with new family members, sometimes even we ourselves feel a little bit awkward because we really don’t know about the challenges, the fears and the other things a family may be facing. But we try very slowly, one step at a time.” | **Altantsetseg Baldandorj** Special Olympics Mongolia

Expect and Overcome These Barriers to Engagement with Family Members



Time Issues

Work schedules or other commitments can keep family members from attending. Having activities during days, evenings and weekends gives people more options to take part.

Internet Access Challenges

“In some regions of the country, some families don’t have access to the internet, so we contact them through the coaches or through the principals of education institutions or the athletes themselves,” said Silvia Britez of **Paraguay**. In **Pakistan**, WhatsApp is the key to communication throughout the country and has been far more useful than email, says Nauman Mehboob.

Struggles with Technology

Elderly family members may not know how to use cell phones and other tech devices to communicate. So in **Macau**, the family team helps train the older people in how to use their devices.

Language Barriers

Four languages are spoken on **Curaçao**, so the Program there arranges for translators to help families with key forms needed for registration. Family members who know English and local languages help translate and also provide cultural inclusiveness in **Pakistan**, Nauman said.

Transportation Challenges

Even on the small island of **Curaçao**, transportation is a challenge because the public bus system is unaffordable for some, said Denise Pestana. And Silvia said families in **Paraguay** may have great distances to travel. There are not always good solutions to this issue, but family network leaders in some countries help out by providing rides to others. Pakistan’s Nauman said the Program plans activities near public transportation when possible.

Social Stigma

In **Rwanda**, “For some families, it’s not easy for them to be open and share the problems they and their kids have. So, reaching them is a challenge,” said Sylvie Kanyemera.

“In **Hungary**, people are afraid of talking with people with ID or parents who are raising up children with ID,” said Viktória Pázmány.

Understanding the stigma and offering a welcoming, supportive introduction helps. “This safe space gives them the opportunity to ask questions. If you begin asking questions and you get answers, then after a time, it will be a communication and a real relationship. And they learn, they don’t have to be afraid,” Viktória says.

Focus on young families to inspire hope and connection.

“We build connections with the special-education institutions like kindergartens, primary schools, and early childhood development centers. We ask for opportunities to present at parent meetings,” says Viktória Pázmány of **Hungary**. “I think it’s very important to meet the families in the early times, when the child is really young because after some years, the parents are burned out. Here, the educational system is segregated, and the parents don’t see a good future for themselves. But Special Olympics gives them the opportunity to have their own future, their own way to live their life.”

Use social media to reach new families.

“When you’re walking on the street, people will recognize coaches or athletes we’ve profiled on social media because it is a small island and a small community,” says Denise Pestana of Special Olympics **Curaçao**.

“We concentrate our efforts on social media to bring more awareness to the Program. That’s the way to reach more family members outside the Program and to get more people to get involved.”

Go to agencies focused on children.

“We hear about new families from friends, people we meet, and school directors. But another way to know about the children is through community and district agencies that are in charge of child welfare,” says Sylvie Kanyemera of Special Olympics **Rwanda**. “We work with those people, and through them we learn of people in that area who have intellectual disability. They help us reach and visit the families.”

Let athlete leaders shine as leaders.

“Athlete leaders come to every family program. They lead workshops with mentors. They speak about their sport life, and they also lead activities about health, physical or mental health. Athlete leaders also come to Young Athletes events.”

| **Viktória Pázmány**, Hungary



INSIGHTS **FOR** FAMILY LEADERS **FROM** FAMILY LEADERS WORLDWIDE

ALASKA

"Our family members are definitely supportive, helpful, thoughtful, eager to be engaged, and excited to get the word out, always."

Dakota Ramirez



MALAYSIA



RWANDA



ARGENTINA

CURAÇAO

"Family members are the most motivated and the most committed. We have volunteers helping, but the family members' motivation to invest in the Program is higher. And that's why the involvement of family members is very important to us."

Denise Pestana

PARAGUAY

"We have a custom deeply rooted in our society of being very united as families, being supportive, participative, and enthusiastic behind the athletes. So, our program enjoys the collaboration of our families."

Silvia Britez

ARGENTINA

"The most important thing that you have to do whenever you want to work with a group of people is just sit with them and listen to what they need, how they live, what they fear, what they enjoy. And then you start working from there up."

Mercedes Fielder

ALBANIA

"The most important thing is families. They understand the role of sports in building the day-to-day independence that their athletes gain if they are engaged in sport and an active lifestyle."

Sara Bala

HUNGARY

"The situation is changing. There are more and more kids living in families and not in segregated institutions. Our board sees that the future is in families and working together with the family program."

Viktória Pázmány

PAKISTAN

"Family members are the best volunteers, the biggest fans, the most prominent advocates. They are the ones who create awareness in society. They always play a positive and exceptional role in the well-being of children with intellectual disabilities."

Nauman Mehboob

MONGOLIA

"Since we joined Special Olympics, we have seen so many changes in the house, in our son's development, in his behavior. And I would say not only him, but the entire family and myself changed a lot."

Dovchinjav Khishigjargal

MACAU

"The goals of our Program will only be viable when our families are willing to support their children."

Cintia Chan

BAHRAIN

"We believe family ideas are important, and they are listened to. Whether an idea is too simple or if it's too complicated, it's given attention and thought."

Nazik Marhoon

RWANDA

"We focus on family engagement because the families are the base. It's where our children with intellectual disabilities are, where they live. Without family, we can't reach the children."

Sylvie Kanyemera

KUWAIT

"The family program successful is because of the variety of backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, age groups, circumstances—all of these things combined together gives us a rich source of knowledge and experience that cannot be discovered in a book or in a YouTube video."

Dr. Ali Dashti

MALAYSIA

"Parents are really the backbone. Parents will go to the moon for their kids and take them, day in, day out, every day they are there."

Connie Yee



"A parent who is on the same level as new parents can look them in the eyes and say, "I did it. You can do it." And that makes the difference and leads to a successful meeting." | Sara Bala Special Olympics Albania |

Help families feel welcome

When you've attracted new families to your Program, take active steps to make them to feel welcome.

"I felt I had a sense of belonging and that I was a part of the community. Not just a mama with a child left isolated at home. And maybe that was the best thing. It was just so great to meet other people who just accepted my child as he was, not looking at him as different." | Amarbuyan "Buyan" Amar, Mongolia



Arrange to have experienced family members on hand to introduce themselves and share about themselves.

"We always welcome new family members through another family member," says Connie Yee of Special Olympics Malaysia. "You know, parents of kids with special needs always have something in common to talk about."

"We have to have cordial behavior with them," says Nauman Mehboob of Special Olympics Pakistan. "We greet them in a welcoming way, and then we listen. They are very eager to inform us about their child. And if we can, we comfort them."

"The most important thing that you have to do whenever you want to work with a group of people is just sit with them and listen to what they need, to how they live, to what they fear, to what they enjoy. And then you start working from there up." | Mercedes Fielder of Special Olympics Argentina.



Treat each family as unique.

"When we first welcome our parents to join the Program, we will offer an interview with them, to know about their current situation and about the condition of their children. We want to know what resources they have and what kind of resources they need, basically so that we can think of which activity, which group, and which services suit them best." | Amy Cheok, Special Olympics Macau

Make registration an easy and comfortable process for new families

Make new family members comfortable first.

"It's not like, 'Hello! Please fill out these registration forms for me!'" says Mercedes Fielder of Special Olympics Argentina. "There are a lot of steps, meetings and conversations."

"We say, you try a few times until you are happy, and you think that you want to continue, and then you register," Connie Yee of Malaysia says. "It's casual. They try it out first."

Help families feel good about Special Olympics.

"We ask our families to have their athlete attend two practices or other events. Always, the families will see the benefits and the positive feelings the athlete feels after being involved," says Nazik Marhoon of Special Olympics Bahrain.

Show family members the value of registering.

Special Olympics Argentina has found family members are eager to have their athlete's health assessed. That's an easy way to get key information.

"We ask families for medical authorization for the registration of their children. They complete the athlete form with all the necessary data for the athlete and the family. It's a very easy process," says Silvia Britez. "And from there, we maintain good contact with the families."



Take it slow. Keep it simple. Pay attention and listen to the people in the room.

"When we visit new cities to expand our family program, we start by introducing resources and how to get to them. And then we keep it simple. We try to read the room and read the energy to see where the parents or teachers want to take us. Have just one goal in mind for the meeting, not two, three, or five goals—just one. Set one goal and then ask questions. Ask them to ask questions, or ask them questions and get some answers. It should be as simple as that." | Sara Bala, Albania

"Families get motivated from our stories. If my story motivates somebody, that person will go and motivate another, and another one, and another." | **Nauman Mehboob** Special Olympics Pakistan |

Get families engaged and **keep them engaged**

Focus on Siblings.

The **Middle East North Africa Region** created a new program for the brothers and sisters of Special Olympics athletes in 2018. The siblings are welcomed, educated, and put to use in many ways in the Programs in the MENA Region, says Nibal Fetouni, Director of Initiatives with the MENA Region Office.

"Siblings are everywhere. They are mentors, they are trainers, they are Unified partners," Nibal says. "They are developing in position with the Programs, as volunteers in sports and in other areas, such as fundraising, Unified Sports, Unified Schools programs."

It's true in other parts of the world, too. Special Olympics **Pakistan** has established an extensive sibling support network in the same places as its support network for adult family members.

"If you do not have sibling engagement program in the Program, you will lose the relationship between the sibling and the athlete with IDD," Nauman Mehboob says. Siblings in **Pakistan** take an important role in developing diverse skills and knowledge of athletes with IDD. Siblings give lessons in photography, using computers, baking, martial arts, crafts and more, he says. "If you do not have a structured program of sibling engagement, you lose everything," Nauman says.

In **Malaysia**, the Program arranges for forums that give siblings of athletes a chance to share their wishes and their worries about their siblings. "When the sibling discuss among themselves, we don't want to get involved. The parents are in another room," says Connie Yee of Special Olympics **Malaysia**.

Everywhere it seems, siblings have a kind of superpower when it comes to communication between themselves. "It's simple," says Dr. Ali Dashti of Special Olympics **Kuwait**. "Siblings of athletes understand them and talk their language better than parents do."

Dr. Dashti speaks from experience. "It's more of a genuine peer level type of thing. My son looks at me as an authority figure, not someone equal and opposite. Hussein listens to his sister a lot better than he listens to me."

Dr. Dashti sees the brothers and sisters of athletes as key to learning skills. "They just understand how to get through. I don't know how they manage to break through, but they do."



Make it fun to be involved.

"We create a relaxing environment for parents when they come join in our program. We will arrange some activities like hiking or singing karaoke to create an environment where they feel welcome," Amy Cheok of Special Olympics **Macau**.

Special Olympics **Bahrain** takes a similar approach with fun, friendly, informal events at no cost to the family. One example was an event at garden park where families brought foods to share, played games and did activities. "As a result, the families got to know one another better and developed stronger relationships," Nazik said.

In Alaska, one of the local programs holds dances monthly for their athletes and their family members. "It gets them all in one room, to dance, have some snacks and get out of the house," says Dakota Ramirez.

"We celebrate Mother's Day, we celebrate Father's Day, we celebrate Down Syndrome Day and Autism Spectrum Disorder Week. We celebrate Eid, we celebrate birthdays," says Nauman Mehboob of **Pakistan**. "We have games and a musical competition. All these things we do to entertain families."

Continue educating families with ongoing trainings and forums

Several Programs said they offer ongoing trainings to family members, including Special Olympics athletes. In **Argentina**, training covers autonomy, self-determination, independent living, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, employment, inclusive education, and sexual health, said Cristina Miranda. "We train the whole family, sometimes all together, sometimes in different groups."

In **Bahrain**, Nazik Marhoon said, trainings cover "self-care, self-calming, mental health, stress reduction, even courses on artificial intelligence."



Educate new families with trainings.

For the newly joined families, we at first do an introduction about the Special Olympics movement itself, what is our vision, what are the goals and what Special Olympics Mongolia can do for this family.

| **Altantsetseg Baldandorj** of **Mongolia**

"If I go and meet other parents, not being a parent myself, let alone a parent of a child with intellectual disabilities, they're like, 'What is she doing here?' I get that in their eyes. I can see it." | Sara Bala Special Olympics Albania |

Build strong communication with families



Connect with families through a support network.

Special Olympics **Pakistan** has had a family support network for more than 25 years. It's the key to effective family connections and communications, said Nauman Mehboob, the national coordinator. In Pakistan, there are five regional family network hubs, and each has 10 or more family members acting as leaders, and even more acting as advisors. Communication flows to each family network hub, and then on to the hundreds of family members involved in that region.

In **Alaska**, the Program area is also large, so there are "community management teams," says Dakota Ramirez.

"Every community management team has a community director who is the main point of contact and gets information out to people in their area and on their local social media. Most of the community directors are family members," Dakota says.

Use surveys to meet the needs of your family members.

At Special Olympics **Kuwait**, family leaders increased engagement in their activities by having a wide range of family members fill out surveys.

"We asked them, 'Tell us what needs to be done for you, for your family members, or your kids. Where do you think we need to go?'," says Dr. Ali Dashti of Special Olympics **Kuwait**.

"One of the reasons was that we wanted them to point out the things that we did not do very well, the things that we did well, and what needs to be done. That helped us a lot as well by giving us guidance on what to focus on. We wanted to increase the satisfaction among family members."

Find the right connection methods for family members.

"When we interview the parents for the first time, we will check to see which way they want to be contacted. Especially the grandparents, who are less likely to use mobile phones," said Amy Cheok of **Macau**.

When electronic communication is not a good option, several Program leaders said they rely on family members, coaches and school personnel to get information to family members who cannot be reached any other way.

Make social media a place for sharing information and getting things done.

Family and Program leaders in most Regions of the world rely on WhatsApp to organize their network and to communicate with the leaders throughout their Program areas.

The groups are helpful in many ways. "We have this group for families where we share our experiences through WhatsApp. We share our knowledge, experiences, pictures, tips, what things to do, what things to avoid, and tricks we can learn from each other. It's like a knowledge repository by which you can always get information. And it's always there," says Dr. Ali Dashti of **Kuwait**.

"We got more people involved by splitting the group into committees," he said. "We have a committee responsible for fundraising, a committee responsible for, awareness and spreading the word. A committee responsible for media coverage. A committee is responsible for preparing the athletes for competitions."

Dr. Dashti added: "We split our tasks and different engagement activities amongst us as a group so that each one is responsible for doing something different. That basically helped a lot of people get involved. They knew what their strengths were, and then they engaged according to their strengths and the attributes they have."

It's similar in **Macau**. "We developed a family support network for our parents so that they feel that they're talking with someone who will understand them and who knows their needs," says Amy Cheok, a staff member with Special Olympics **Macau**. "We have different groups serving different parents with different needs. For adults who are very stressed, we have a relaxation group. For adults who need information, we have a group that keeps up to date with new policies and benefits in social welfare."



"We realized that the athletes and family members are more interesting for the donors to talk to than our Program staff. And they have really good questions for them to answer." | **Altantsetseg Baldandorj** Special Olympics Mongolia |

Focus on your family engagement team

Special Olympics Program staffs range from very small to large, but all Programs can make family members a part of their work and their network.

Build a team of family representatives throughout your Program area.

"As we began to rebuild our family program, it was not centralized thinking, but regional thinking and local thinking," said Viktória Pázmány of **Hungary**.

"I thought we should make regional programs as well and create a family program team," Viktória said. "There's one person coordinating the program overall, and there are regional coordinators as well. We began to find family members who might be interested, and we spoke to them about the vision of Special Olympics and our family program."

Give family leaders lessons in leadership and advocacy



PAKISTAN

Family members in **Pakistan** have access to a well-developed set of lessons on leadership skills and advocacy, says Nauman Mehboob. "In our family leaders training, we discuss and emphasize that the top priority and the top quality is to be courteous, humble, supportive, cooperative and a very good listener. A listener, first of all. And the person should be available any time, for anything," Nauman said.

These are behaviors which our families have adopted, and now they are promoting to other people as role models."

Understand that one person cannot do it all.

That way of thinking is driven by a simple fact, that no one person—or even one small team—can be everywhere and do everything in a Program's territory.

"I try to be present all I can, but I am one person, and we have millions of people in our country," said Cristina Miranda of **Argentina**. "So, the role of our family coordinators is key."

"We get much better results as a team. No one person can make change happen or meet the various needs of diverse families. Together, as a team, we face difficulties and get over them."

| **Nazik Marhoon** SO Bahrain



MALAYSIA

To succeed with family engagement, master the ability to wait

It might be tempting to try to build your family engagement team by quickly recruiting family members in communities near and far.

Look to Sara Bala and Special Olympics **Albania** for the case for taking it slow. "I would say I have mastered the ability to wait," said Sara. "We could have taken on a family engagement project earlier, but it was not the time."

It was not the time because family members had to learn about Special Olympics. They needed to understand deeply what was at stake and to understand that they could make changes happen, she said.

At first, she said, family members asked about practical matters like getting their child to practice and who should and should not get a T-shirt.

That changed as they grew to understand the larger issues that they and other families deal with. "They're asking fundamental questions," Sara said. "They're asking about health benefits. They're asking about transportation matters. They're trying to get people who work for the government to change the law for sport and for transportation.

"We are doing very wonderful, very powerful work now," Sara said. "A committee of parents is trying to get a law passed not just because their child is not getting services but because all people with ID should be getting services."

The change in understanding had a rewarding effect. "When family members are more than just involved, but they understand the concepts and the logic of why we are doing sports, why we're doing health-based programs, why we gather as a group of families... When they understand that they need to be here, that they need to be part of the discussion, family involvement increases, and our numbers go up," Sara said.

It took three years for the change to evolve and spread among the families. "Waiting—that's the hardest thing that I have done professionally so far in my 12 years of experience," Sara said. "I now know what I am waiting for, and how to read the cues for when the waiting is over."

"One of the biggest things our families love is the community that we build. They can see the bigger picture, that it's not just about yourself. You're creating an environment that's inclusive, and you're showing up for someone else."

Dakota Ramirez Special Olympics Alaska

Ten tips to make the most of family engagement

01. Really trust the family members and give them some tasks to do.

Engage them as much as possible in your activities and activities so that they can independently and voluntarily be involved in our activities, not by force, not because they have to do it, but because it comes from the heart, from being willing to contribute for the community of family members with children with intellectual disabilities."

Altantsetseg Baldandorj SO Mongolia

02. Provide training for parents to improve their leadership and advocacy skills when they join your Program.

"We have gotten parents to bargain for benefits with the government for our service users and also to provide opinions to the government about the policies that fit our services best."

Amy Cheok SO Macau

03. Kick things off with new families with a Healthy Athletes screening.

"Part of the welcoming process is explaining the benefits of a Healthy Athletes screening to the family. It helps us and the family to know the athlete's health status and to plan for treatments if there are things that need addressing."

Nazik Marhoon SO Bahrain

04. Motivate families by making them part of your Program activities.

"We have to make them understand they are an important part of Special Olympics. When we talk about activities, we ask how they want to participate in the activities as volunteers or in another significant role."

Silvia Britez SO Paraguay



05. Create a support structure led by family leaders.

"Establish a family council if you don't have it. Establish a family support network if you don't have it. Because without the council, without the network you can not move forward. You have to have a structured approach."

Nauman Mehboob SO Pakistan

06. Involve Program staff members with family engagement efforts.

"All of our staff are connected with and responsive to family needs and concerns. The staff willingly and enthusiastically involves family members and their ideas and needs because we believe family members are fundamental and essential to the success of the Program."

Nazik Marhoon SO Bahrain

07. Hold family sport events to get family members more engaged.

"We've had competitions with the family members involved. It was very simple and very successful. We have a bocce competition between family and the athletes and the coaches, and that gets the family members more involved."

Denise Pestana SO Curaçao



08. Identify and take advantage of the skills and interests family members bring.

"Many family members get involved by volunteering in ways that align with their interests and skills. Some who are good with accounting get involved with fundraising; some who are good with communication help with marketing."

Nazik Marhoon SO Bahrain

09. Let family members help you work through athlete behavior issues.

"When we have athletes whose behavior is difficult to deal with, we invite the family members to talk privately, in person. They will tell us how to approach them and talk to them."

Altantsetseg Baldandorj SO Mongolia

10. Understand that the level of family engagement directly affects the success of a Program.

"The more families are involved, the better the outcomes are for the athletes and the stronger the local Programs are. Without family support, our local Programs start to die."

Dakota Ramirez SO Alaska



"The thing is, it's important for the parents and the teachers to witness first-hand the difference it makes in the athlete's life just to be part of one single activity, just being able to score a goal, to score one point." | Sara Bala
Special Olympics Albania

Keep these thoughts in mind



ARGENTINA

"We don't think of ourselves in the place of knowing but think of ourselves as accompanying the family. It's not like, 'Join us because we are the best in the world and we know everything. It's more like, "We are just going to share this life with you in some way. And we want to walk with you and help you whatever we can."

| Mercedes Fielder SO Argentina



MONGOLIA

"Family members teach us very much, so value their contributions and always show respect. This is very important. Listen to them and seek their true stories. We learned from family members more than from anybody else, more than from some professionals or speakers."

| Altantsetseg Baldandorj SO Mongolia

"I realized it is important to make changes. Making change is always hard, but change is needed to make progress and improve."

| Nazik Marhoon SO Bahrain



BAHRAIN



PAKISTAN



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